

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D13THE WASHINGTON POST
25 January 1980

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Did a Trusting Carter Invite Crisis?

There is quiet, nagging conviction in the Washington strategy councils that President Carter himself laid the groundwork for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

His unsure, unsteady hand at the helm, the strategists think, encouraged the Soviets to strike.

The strategists doubt that the wily but wary old men of the Kremlin would have risked a massive military move to the rim of the western oil reserves if they had thought the president would stand up to them.

In an earlier column, I described how the Soviets had tested Carter's mettle at the beginning of his term. They repeatedly rebuffed him, and he repeatedly rebounded—full of confidence that morality would triumph.

He was sure he could reach an understanding with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev if only they could sit down together. Carter believed that the sincerity of his purpose and the power of his faith would overcome the barriers between them, that a summit meeting would ease world tensions and reduce the nuclear threat.

The president was enthusiastic as an evangelist when at last he confronted Brezhnev in Vienna last June. Carter beamed happily when the Soviet leader responded to his appeal for world peace by declaring: "God will not forgive us if we fail." Eagerly, Carter jotted down the remark on a sheaf of yellow paper.

Other members of the American delegation looked startled at the old atheist's reference to the deity. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, apparently sensing their surprise, pointed at

the ceiling and confirmed: "you know, that's the Guy up there."

Carter left Vienna exuberant over his new personal relationship with the Kremlin czar. But intelligence reports suggest that Brezhnev was less impressed with Carter. According to one report, Brezhnev regarded his American counterpart as weak and waffling.

The next crisis came just a few months later. Photo reconnaissance detected a Soviet combat brigade on maneuvers a few miles south of Havana. Soviet advisers had been in Cuba for 17 years, but the appearance of a combat force within 90 miles of our shores was disturbing new development.

The president registered a protest with his new friend in the Kremlin. Back came a flat denial that a Soviet combat brigade had been sent to Cuba. Carter complained to congressional leaders that the Soviets were lying. "The Soviets deny it has combat status," he told them privately. "But it is a combat unit."

He made his protest public. The presence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, he declared, was unacceptable. He would use diplomacy, he said, "to get the Soviets to eliminate the combat nature of this unit . . . If we do not succeed, we will take appropriate action to change the status quo."

Seventeen years earlier, the Soviets had backed away from Cuban confrontation with President John F. Kennedy. This time it was America's turn to back away. What had been unacceptable four weeks earlier, Carter conceded, was now acceptable.

Carter's backdown came last October. There is solid intelligence that the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan came later the same month. U.S. analysts believe that the two events were related, that Carter's nervous handling of the Cuban crisis convinced the Kremlin it could get away with aggression in Afghanistan.

Carter had made such a sorry hash of things in Iran, meanwhile, that the Soviets were tempted to close in on the oil fields. At first, Brezhnev tried to mask his military moves by announcing a unilateral withdrawal of Soviet troops and tanks from East Germany. He made this appear to be a concession to western Europe.

In reality, the Soviet units were quietly moved to the borders of Afghanistan. They reinforced an airborne division, which was also put on a war footing.

The military buildup was monitored by U.S. intelligence agencies, which submitted reports to the president. He sought an explanation from Moscow, and Brezhnev reassured him that the Soviets intended no military action.

The trusting Carter accepted Brezhnev's assurances. Later Carter took the Afghanistan aggression as a personal affront. He was particularly offended by Brezhnev's explanation over the Moscow-Washington hot line that the Soviet troops had been "invited" into Afghanistan. "This was obviously false," the president later commented angrily.

But with the election only nine months away, he now seeks to project himself as the hero of his own catastrophes.